

6 September 2015 (15th Sunday After Pentecost/23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Breaking the Bonds of Oppression”
Mark 7:24-37

Sometimes we undergo experiences that completely drain us of all energy. While I was serving as a campus minister in Norfolk, Virginia, I was invited to guest preach at one of our churches that was located in a changing neighborhood, its building aging and in need of repair, its congregation shrinking and unable to afford a full-time pastor. They had a stated supply pastor who was only there on Sundays, and I don't think they offered much of anything in the way of programs during the week. That particular Sunday I remember feeling really good about the sermon I had prepared. I knew a few members of the congregation, and I was looking forward to seeing them and meeting others. But as the service began, I felt as though I was the only person in the room. There were people sitting in the pews, but they were so still and expressionless. As I started to preach, I thought that at least I'd be able to establish eye contact with someone, but that proved unsuccessful. By the time worship was ended, I was exhausted. And when I got home, all I wanted to do was crawl into bed and take a nap, which I did. I slept all afternoon. That was, and is, a rarity for me, unless I've been burning the candle at both ends in the preceding days. Thereafter, I was asked a couple of other times to preach at that church, but I always looked for a reason to decline the invitation.

What is it about certain experiences that leave us feeling thoroughly drained? What was it about that particular Sunday that left me feeling completely exhausted? As I reflected on it, I kept coming back to that sense of being the only one in the room, of preaching to mannequins, of leading worship in a tomb. Like trying to talk or sing in an acoustically dead space, hearing only the sound of one's own voice is strange and lonely. Especially in a community of faith, our life together depends on response and communion, on support and affirmation.

As I read the portion of Mark's Gospel before us today, I wonder if Jesus felt thoroughly drained after his exchange with the scribes and Pharisees about what it is that defiles a person. As we saw in last week's reading, after they roundly criticized the disciples for failing to observe the ritual washing of hands before eating, the scribes and Pharisees held Jesus responsible. And Jesus, in turn, called them hypocrites for failing to appreciate that it is what lies within the human heart that defiles, not what enters the body from without. But after this outpouring of teaching and emotion, he withdraws, and not just to a quiet place around the corner. He withdraws to another country, venturing further than he would at any other time in his ministry. Jesus heads to the predominantly Greek-speaking region of Tyre and Sidon where he doesn't know anyone, and where he is fairly certain nobody knows him. We really don't know why, but I can't help but wonder whether he wanted to do some thinking about his target audience. Should he focus exclusively upon the “lost sheep of Israel,” as Matthew refers to the Jewish community, or should he reach beyond them? Jesus had just tangled with the tradition-mired religious authorities that he felt were missing the very essence of God's presence. Did Jesus wonder what it was like somewhere else? Did he

want to break the bonds of oppression that stood in the way of Isaiah's vision expressed in the text we have heard today?

The encounter Jesus has with the Syrophenician woman who begs him to heal her daughter is not one that he has sought out. In the interests of getting away where no one knows him, Jesus is not expecting to find someone in the north country who has. He resists this Gentile woman who, by faith, is convinced that only he can break the bonds that oppress her daughter. She knows that she is not one of the children entitled to sit at table for the full meal, yet is content to scour for the crumbs that fall her way. But unlike the encounter with the scribes and Pharisees, this encounter gives Jesus energy and purpose because of the woman's faith—it restores his ministry, and he immediately heads back to Galilee where he continues to fulfill the vision of Isaiah. How ironic that the very tradition that birthed Jesus should have so drained him, and that an odd encounter with a woman who really had no right to ask him for anything should have so positively affected him.

The story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman seems to be one that many people have trouble with. They struggle with Jesus' less than enthusiastic response at the start, and they really don't like the way he seems to compare the woman to a dog who scrounges for crumbs. In Matthew's Gospel, the disciples prevail upon Jesus to send her away because she is bothering them. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus deals with her alone. But the resistance is the same in both accounts, as is the oddity of Jesus withdrawing to a place he had no real reason to visit, and never would again. Why, then, is this story so important, and what is it doing in the Gospels? There were certainly other Gentiles closer to home that Jesus could have encountered. There were other places closer to home to which Jesus could have retreated. Perhaps the story reveals an important insight about Jesus and his human nature that can help us better understand our own. Perhaps it has something to say to us about the need to break the bonds of oppression in search of faith when we feel exhausted and drained in our ministry, to seek the greater vision of God that we must continually recover.

In the Letter of James, we receive some very pointed advice about what it truly means to fulfill the law of God and the vision of God that Christ has given us. As Jesus skewered the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, James skewers his audience for the hypocrisy of passing judgment without showing mercy. As James describes it, judging others according to our own standards of greatness or worthiness immediately implicates us for showing partiality. And we tend to show partiality when we have lost God's vision, when we have succumbed to exhaustion and discouragement. We wonder whether our ministry as a church is doing any good, or why we even bother. We become bound by bonds of oppression, hemmed in by fear and averse to taking risks in faith for the sake of the Gospel. And over time, without even realizing it is happening, we start to become a drain on others, like the church I visited that Sunday where the congregation had become like mannequins, dull and lifeless.

What can break these bonds? What can restore the vision of God, not just once, but continually, so that it is as fresh and exciting today as it was yesterday, and the day before that? This sacrament we share, in these elements that symbolize the body and blood of Christ, restores our shared need for God's love and redemption, and our common calling to love the world without partiality. Far more than a ritual, this sacrament is who we are. It is

how we recalibrate our ministry, our reason for being, and our purpose in this community. If you have ever felt weary of the church or oppressed by church work or straitjacketed by others' expectations, this sacrament is for you. Come to the table as full members, no longer relegated to scrounge for crumbs, but welcomed and invited to celebrate the feast. Jesus has broken the bonds of oppression. He has healed and restored you, and gives you a vision and a purpose.



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